

A Picture of Patience

Come with me to Paris, France, 1954. Elie Wiesel is a correspondent for a Jewish newspaper. A decade earlier he was a prisoner in a Jewish concentration camp. A decade later he would be known as the author of *Night*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the Holocaust. Eventually he'll be awarded the congressional Medal of Achievement and the Nobel Peace Prize.

But tonight Elie Wiesel is a 26-old unknown newspaper correspondent. He is about to interview the French author Francois Mauriac, who is a devout Christian. Mauriac is France's most recent Nobel laureate for literature and an expert on French political life.

Wiesel shows up at Mauriac's apartment, nervous and chain-smoking—his emotions still frayed from the German horror, his comfort as a writer still raw. The older Mauriac tries to put him at ease. He invites Wiesel in, and the two sit in the small room. Before Wiesel can ask a question, however, Mauriac, a staunch Roman Catholic, begins to speak about his favorite subject: Jesus. Wiesel grows uneasy. The name of Jesus is a pressed thumb on his infected wounds.

Wiesel tries to reroute the conversation but can't. It is as though everything in creation leads back to Jesus. Jerusalem? Jerusalem is where Jesus ministered. The Old Testament? Because of Jesus, the Old is now enriched by the New. Mauriac turns every topic toward the Messiah. The anger in Wiesel begins to heat. The Christian anti-Semitism he'd grown up with, the layers of grief from Sighet, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald—it all boils over. He puts away his pen, shuts his notebook, and stands up angrily.

"Sir," he said to the still-seated Mauriac, "you speak of Christ. Christians love to speak of him. The passion of Christ, the agony of Christ, the death of Christ. In your religion, that is all you speak of. Well, I want you to know that tens years ago, not very far from here, I knew Jewish children every one of whom suffered a thousand times more, six million times more, than Christ on the cross. And we don't speak about them. Can you understand that, sir? We don't speak about them." (David Aikman, *Great Souls: Six Who Changed the Century*, Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998, p. 341-342.)

Mauriac is stunned. Wiesel turns and marches out the door. Mauriac sits in shock, his woolen blanket still around him. The young reporter is pressing the elevator button when Mauriac appears in the hall. He gently reaches for Wiesel's arm. "Come back," he implores. Wiesel agrees, and the two sit on the sofa. At this point Mauriac begins to weep. He looks at Wiesel but says nothing. Just tears.

Wiesel starts to apologize. Mauriac will have nothing of it. Instead he urges his young friend to talk. He wants to hear about it—the camps, the trains, the deaths. He asks Wiesel why he hasn't put this to paper. Wiesel tells him the pain is too severe. He's made a vow of silence. The older man tells him to break it and speak out.

The evening changed them both. The drama became the soil of a life-long friendship. They corresponded until Mauriac's death in 1970. "I owe Francois Mauriac my career," Wiesel has said . . .and it was to Mauriac that Wiesel sent the first manuscript of *Night*.

What if Mauriac had kept the door shut? Would anyone have blamed him? Cut by the sharp words of Wiesel, he could have become impatient with the angry young man and have been glad to be rid of him. But he didn't and he wasn't. He reacted decisively, quickly, and lovingly. He was "slow to boil." And, because he was, a heart began to heal.

May I urge you to do the same?

"God is being patient with you" (2 Pet. 3:9). And if God is being patient with you, can't you pass on some patience to others? Of course you can. Because before love is anything else:
Love is patient.